

Position statement: new veterinary schools

A new veterinary school is due to open in 2014 in Surrey. Others may follow. The profession and the public are interested in the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' (RCVS) opinion on the increasing number of schools.

This statement seeks to clarify our role in the debate, and why it is not appropriate that we comment on the desirability, or otherwise, of any change in the number of schools or the number of graduates produced by existing schools.

In summary:

- In line with our purpose, we are committed to setting, upholding and advancing the standards that any new UK veterinary degrees would need to meet in order to be approved by the Privy Council
- We also seek to support healthy debate through providing information on the state of the profession
- We have no mandate to control student or graduate numbers
- The free market and mobility of workers in the EU makes any control at the level of sovereign state effectively meaningless with respect to workforce management
- However, we are committed to promoting and advancing standards in education outside the UK, working with bodies such as the European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education, which evaluates veterinary degrees across Europe

Our role is expanded upon below.

RCVS purpose

The RCVS exists to set, uphold and advance veterinary standards. The RCVS was established in 1844 in response to falling standards in veterinary schools. Since our inception, we have set the standards required for veterinary surgeons to register, originally by running the membership examination, and, in more recent history, inspecting the degree courses that lead to registration.

We also inspect new veterinary schools before their degrees can be formally approved by the Privy Council, and thus their graduates able to register with us without taking any further examinations.

We look at the establishment of new veterinary schools through the lens of setting, upholding and advancing veterinary standards. We do not make any recommendation to the Privy Council until the first cohort of graduates has graduated.

If a veterinary degree course does not meet the detailed standards we have set for accreditation, then we will not recommend it to the Privy Council until it does. The Privy Council may invite us to set examinations for any students at a non-approved UK university in the meantime, and this ensures that we retain control of the standards required for registration.

We judge each school – new or existing – against the same accreditation criteria and on its own merits. It would not therefore be appropriate for us to take a view on whether a proposed new school was required by the market, as this might be seen to prejudice our impartiality in deciding whether it met the accreditation criteria

Our accreditation criteria require us to be assured that universities awarding veterinary degrees have sufficient staff and resources to deliver the whole programme effectively. One of the issues that may concern us is whether there are sufficient academic staff to support the growing numbers of students.

We will work with the Heads of the Veterinary Schools to see whether there are issues we should be concerned about, and, if so, how best it can be dealt with.

Facilitating healthy debate

We also seek to make all relevant information available to the profession and the public so that informed decisions can be made elsewhere.

For example, in July, we published a summary report on the impact of increasing numbers of veterinary graduates, alongside the economic downturn, on the challenges of new graduates entering employment.

The figures showed that an average of 94 per cent of recent graduates were in permanent employment within six months of starting to look for work.

We will also be publishing further information in spring 2014 on other issues as they affect the profession, as part of our four-yearly Survey of the Profession.

Many other veterinary organisations, including the British Veterinary Association (BVA), will no doubt wish to comment on how they see new veterinary schools affecting their membership. A healthy debate on these issues is appropriate, but so too is the need for clarity around the role of the RCVS.

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